

Gamergate: a brief history of a computer-age war

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Zoe Quinn, the game developer at the centre of the Gamergate controversy. Photograph: Samuel Kirby/Samuel Kirby

When a 24-year-old American called Eron Gjoni posted a blog complaining about the behaviour of his ex-girlfriend, it is unlikely that he expected to ignite a culture war which is still reverberating through the industry six months later.

“The Zoe post”, published in August 2014, made a series of unfounded accusations that Gjon’s former lover Zoe Quinn, an independent games developer, had traded sex for positive reviews. Soon, an army of internet dwellers had seized on this opportunity to police a woman’s sexual behaviour under the guise of promoting “ethics in games journalism”.

What was most astonishing about Gamergate (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamergate>) was how quickly it grew. Like a hurricane, it ripped new grievances out of the ground and rolled them up with long-established hatreds and arguments. Its supporters call their enemies “social justice warriors” and worry that they will usher in a new age where the latest Call of Duty (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/call-of-duty>) won’t let you shoot nameless baddies - but instead ask you to talk about your feelings.

Over the course of the autumn, Gamergaters seemed angry about many things: the increasing number of women playing and featuring in video games; the sometimes overly cosy friendships between games developers and the journalists who covered their work; and the meaninglessness of “gamer” as an identity in an age where your grandma can play a £2.99 puzzler on her iPhone.

For Gamergaters, the “good old days” were the time when games were designed with teenage boys in mind, and were deliberately tasteless, violent and macho. So it is no wonder that many of them hate Twine – a simple tool which allows anyone to build a text adventure on a web page. The Twine scene is also notably liberal and progressive: several of its leading lights are gay or transgender, and subjects include mental illness, gender dysphoria, sadomasochism and kinky sex. Twine games are unavoidably lo-fi – a stark contrast to the lavish visuals and A-list voice acting found in blockbuster console releases. Many titles are designed as a

deliberate rebuke to the mainstream, which rarely shows much interest in depicting alternative lifestyles or engaging with social issues. For these reasons, it's unlikely Twine will become the next YouTube or Vine: its fans love it precisely because it is a niche community rather than a venture capital-chasing startup.

Which brings us to the subject of money – another Gamergate grievance. Because Twine developers do not have access to the vast marketing budgets of major studios, many games journalists who sympathise with their artistic and political aims have championed them. Some writers have contributed to crowdfunding appeals for independent games. On a site called Patreon (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/19/crowdfunding-patreon-creators-musicians-youtube>), both games journalists and developers have solicited donations from friends and fans.

This activity fostered the idea of a network of friends who had financial stakes in promoting each other's careers. The Patreon concept was seized upon by Gamergaters – though there are larger ethical issues to address, such as the alleged practice of publishers offering YouTube stars money to cover their games positively.

Nonetheless, in the wake of the online storm, sites such as Kotaku (<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/mar/13/gawker-future-lifehacker-kotaku-uk>) – part of the Gawker network – banned their writers from contributing to crowdfunding appeals. Kotaku's US editor Stephen Totilo wrote that Gamergate “has been, if nothing else, a good warning to all of us about the pitfalls of cliquishness in the indie dev scene.” While Gamergate had sporadic victories – Intel pulled ads from a site called

Gamasutra (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jan/07/intel-pledges-300m-diversity-tech-sector>) after a letter-writing campaign – its main legacy seems to have been to entrench existing divisions.

Five months on, the movement has faded to a background hum. Gamergate supporters still congregate on sites such as Reddit to discuss how to persuade advertisers to boycott websites they dislike, but much of the energy has dissipated. Like many Twitter campaigns, the ease of joining – which made it so powerful initially – eventually destroyed Gamergate. It became a magnet for sexist bullies who drowned out any substantive points. That said, the forces that drove it have not abated, so Gamergate (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamergate>) is unlikely to die – it will simply mutate.

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